



Danica D'Hondt

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A House Is Not a Home (1964). Photo courtesy of Glamour Girls of the Silver Screen.



Danica D'Hondt, Sharon Tate, David McCallum, Kathy Kersh in a publicity still for *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* episode "The Girls of Nazarene Affair" (1965).



Danica D'Hondt and Jacques Bergerac in *Unkissed Bride* (1966).

Q&A

SAMUEL CLEMENS

Danica D'Hondt is a multi-talented entertainer and businesswoman whose career has spanned several decades. A gorgeous English-Canadian blonde, she was crowned Miss Canada of 1958. She flew to Hollywood where she appeared in *Living Venus* (1961), *The Thrill of It All* (1963), *Bedtime Story* (1964), *A House Is Not a Home* (1964), and *Unkissed Bride* (1966). She had success on television in series like *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.*, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, *The Wild Wild West*, *Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea*, *The United States Steel Hour*, and *Tarzan*. Co-workers include Marlon Brando, Tommy Kirk, Robert Vaughn, and Shelley Winters. She eventually scaled back on acting to pursue directing critically-acclaimed stage productions in Los Angeles and San Francisco. The London-born Danica is somebody who has numerous talents beyond the performing arts. She's authored two books, *Make Fashion Magic* and *Nothing Bad Happens Ever*, and several scripts. She also runs a renowned winery which

has won several awards at the West Coast Wine Competition, Orange County Fair, California State Fair, Lodi Wine Awards, and others. She lives in Cameron Park, California, where she remains active with her businesses, writings, and family. I was fortunate that she found time to talk with us about her extensive and diverse career on and off screen.

Samuel Clemens: When did you become interested in the performing arts? Were your parents supportive?

Danica D'Hondt: I was attending school in London when one of my classmate's parents was producing a film that needed children in it. He took our class to Shepperton Studios to film it. I was never told the title of the film, but I remember wearing Swiss attire, waving at a train that wasn't there, and singing in French. I realized then that I wanted to act. My parents were not supportive, as they felt that the industry was degrading. My mother was a bit pretentious in general. When I was 14 years old, I told my mother that I wanted to be an actress. She took me to the Montreal Playhouse and asked the staff to hire me to do

menial tasks. She had hoped that the experience would make me hate acting, but the opposite happened. I became a production assistant, and I learned a lot from the actors at the theater.

SC: You attended the University of British Columbia. Did you study acting?

Danica D'Hondt: I had planned to be an architect like my father, so I attended college to be an architect, but I was making a lot of money doing acting onstage and on radio. I eventually left college, as I didn't want to do seven years of study to become an architect. It was shortly afterwards that I competed in Miss Canada, which my mother was embarrassed by.

SC: You did a lot of stage productions, including *Back to Methuselah*, *Li'l Abner*, *The Fifth Season*, and *Paradise Enow*. Was there one that had any significance to you?

Danica D'Hondt: *The Marriage-Go-Round* helped launch my career. I was cast because I looked like Julie Newmar, who starred in the production on Broadway. We performed at the Gateway Plaza on Long Island in 1961. It was there that I was discovered by

Joyce Selznick, who was David O. Selznick's niece. She introduced me to the William Morris Agency, who signed me. She tried to get me a contract with Columbia Pictures, but I was pregnant so I had to stop acting for several months.

SC: Were there any great acting instructors who you felt contributed to the success of your career? What method of acting were you taught?

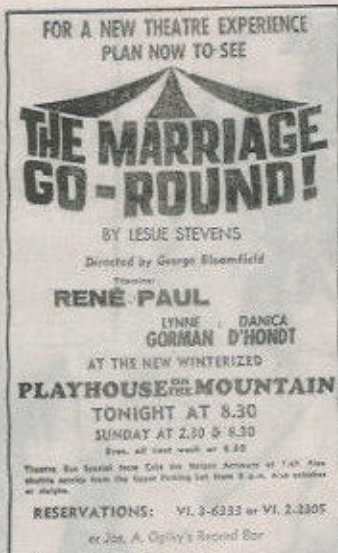
Danica D'Hondt: I studied acting with Lee Strasberg, who I wasn't impressed with. I didn't like what he was teaching. My mentor was Basya Hunter, who I studied with at the Toronto Arts Theater. She taught Michael Chekhov's method of acting, which was sort of a hybrid of Stanislavski. I took a directing class of hers as well, and she said that I had a lot of promise. She inspired me to direct, which is what I was really passionate about. She later introduced me to José Quintero, who I took a class with. José liked my directing so much that he hugged me and said I was great. I felt so much joy afterwards.

SC: While attending the University of British Columbia, you studied Shakespeare. It was shortly afterwards that you starred in *Othello* with William Marshall at Theater by the Sea. What are the challenges of reciting Shakespeare as opposed to contemporary stories?

Danica D'Hondt: I was Desdemona. I was one of the few actresses in Hollywood who had studied Shakespeare. Being from England, I grew up with Shakespeare. It was not foreign to me. The issue with Americans doing Shakespeare is the way the language is written. I also did a lot of Shakespeare productions while in Canada like *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, and *The Merchant of Venice*.

SC: It was revealed in Paul Marin's autobiography that William Marshall attacked you onstage during rehearsals for *Othello*. Is there any truth to this?

Danica D'Hondt: I had dinner with William. I had to get his approval before being cast in *Othello*. He felt that Caucasians were prejudiced, so he kept testing me. He was incredibly handsy when we rehearsed. He kept putting his tongue in my mouth and trying to grab my breasts. I asked him to ease



Living Venus publicity art.

up, and he said, "No! It helps me with my performance!" ... I eventually quit the production because I didn't want to have anything to do with him.

SC: You won a bevy of titles, including Million Dollar Baby, Miss Vancouver Centennial, and Miss Canada. How did pageants affect your career as a performer?

Danica D'Hondt: It certainly changed the trajectory of my career. It led to opportunities and obstacles. One of the issues I had with winning Miss Canada was that they expected me to tour unpaid for a year, and I was forbidden from doing additional performing that entire year. I got an agent named Paul Simmons, who negotiated with the committee so that I could tour with advance notice and do other things. My mother was horrified when I won Miss Canada.



Barbara Luna and Danica D'Hondt in *The Wild Wild West, "The Night of the Deadly Bed"* (1965).



Danica D'Hondt and Richard Basehart in "Escape from Venice," a 1965 episode of *Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea*.

I was a bit surprised. I didn't expect to win. After the year-long tour, I was hired as a panelist on *Live a Borrowed Life*. It was a popular series in Canada. I was also a co-host on *Late Night with Larry Mann*.

SC: *Living Venus* is a cult classic

among filmgoers. In 1990, columnist Joe Bob Briggs referred to it as one of "the sleaziest movies in the history of the world." How did you get that role? What did you think of the finished product despite controversies about the film?

Danica D'Hondt: It was a bad experience, so I only saw the film once. I was cast by Herschell Gordon Lewis, who was the director. We had a lot of clashes on set. The equipment was unsafe, he had a temper, and he expected that I'd



In the 1966 Tarzan TV episode "A Life for a Life," Danica D'Hondt plays Maggie Calloway.



In November of 1960, Miss Canada Danica D'Hondt presents a miniature totem pole to the lord mayor of London, Sir Edmund Stockdale, at Mansion House in London.

appear nude. It was illegal to appear nude on film in the United States of America, but it was acceptable in Europe as long as you were over 21 years old. I was 20 years old, and Herschell expected that I'd do retakes after turning 21 so he could air the film in Europe. He thought that he could earn a larger profit there. I wasn't going to do that, which he did not like.

SC: What was your most vivid memory of that film?

Danica D'Hondt: I remember that I did a scene with Harvey Korman by the poolside. While filming, I heard a scream. Suddenly I see one of the production assistants running towards a runaway spotlight that was being blown towards the pool by the wind. I was so thankful that he caught it. He said that if it had fallen into the pool, I could've been electrocuted. Another memory of that film is that I helped a friend's daughter, Jackie DeShannon, get a walk-on role. A few years later, she had a hit with the song "What the World Needs Now Is Love."

SC: Was there anyone in the cast of *Living Venus* who you were fond of?

Danica D'Hondt: Harvey Korman was wonderful. We kept in touch for years. He even recommended me for a part in *Who Was That Lady I Saw You With?* which starred Joey Bishop and Lori Nelson. I didn't like William Kerwin. I met my eventual husband, Paul [Ellsworth], on set. He was part of the crew.

SC: With Leona Gage, Raquel Welch, and Annabelle Thiele, you played an escort in *A House Is Not a Home*. How did you feel about playing such a provocative role?

Danica D'Hondt: We were in the entire film, but the parts were insignificant. We played prostitutes. I wasn't thrilled about it, but at least I had dialogue. They had initially written the dialogue for Raquel Welch, but she was so nervous because it was her first part. She went to the restroom and was puking. They decided to give me the dialogue. I became good friends with Shelley Winters on set. She was very outspoken, and we kept in touch for years. She even acted in a film that I wrote and directed about Marilyn Monroe.

SC: You said in an interview de-

cades ago that you rejected the role of Ginger in *Gilligan's Island*. How did that happen?

Danica D'Hondt: I was cast in *Gilligan's Island*, but the producers had put the filming on hold for months as they were trying to perfect the script. I wasn't allowed to do other acting gigs while on contract, so I asked my agent to get me out of the contract. He was furious and urged me to reconsider. Honestly, I didn't like the premise of *Gilligan's Island*. I don't have regrets about it.

SC: Are there any roles that you pursued but didn't get?

Danica D'Hondt: I auditioned for a role in *Seven Days in May* (1964). John Frankenheimer wanted me for the role of Eleanor Holbrook. He said, "It's going to be your part." I had to go to Kirk Douglas' house to get his approval. I went with my agent, who said, "Take your wedding ring off." After meeting Kirk and talking with him for a bit, he asked, "Are you married?" I said, "Yes." My agent was angry. Kirk Douglas didn't like working with married women because he knew that he couldn't sleep with them. Kirk didn't like my name either and said that it'd look odd on the marquee. Although it wasn't a disqualifying factor, John [Frankenheimer] sold his shares of the film to United Artists, and they decided they wanted somebody more experienced. They cast Ava Gardner instead.

SC: What was Marlon Brando like in *Bedtime Story*?

Danica D'Hondt: He was silly and juvenile. He didn't memorize lines, which angered the director. There was a scene where I was in a car with him, and the director said, "When I wave this newspaper, you gotta start your dialogue" while I fed him his lines. Marlon said to the director in an arrogant tone, "You're the best newspaper waver I've ever worked with."

SC: How about Rock Hudson in *A Very Special Favor* (1965)?

Danica D'Hondt: He was a sweetheart. He loved playing bridge. He had several pin-ups of women in his trailer to curb the gossip about his sexual orientation.

SC: Your episode of *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.*, "The Girls from Nazarene Affair," is perhaps the most popular episode of that se-

ries. I'm curious, since you drove a race car in that episode, if you are a professional racer.

Danica D'Hondt: I've driven race cars. I learned it from Stirling Moss while I was touring for Miss Canada. He took me around the raceway and showed me the basics. I didn't think that years later I'd be using those skills. They had two race cars in *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.*, one of which was a novice for actors to use. That car had a mechanical issue, so I was told before rehearsals that I had to drive the actual race car. The stunt driver brought the car into the cul-de-sac in Topanga Canyon where we were filming. There were a lot of people around the cul-de-sac, so they set some bales of hay to protect them. Unfortunately, whoever parked the car had the wheels turned, so the car immediately spun around as I pressed the accelerator. I got control of the car and prevented a collision. The director loved it and added it to the reel, but I was in a state of panic as I could've run over several people.

SC: What was Sharon Tate like? You did several scenes with her in that episode.

Danica D'Hondt: I didn't expect her to be famous. In fact, nobody did. She was very sweet. I got along with her well. We had lunch after we finished filming. We were becoming good friends. I expected to see her more, but I didn't as she died a few years later. Her sister is a friend of mine. I have nothing bad to say about Sharon.

SC: Who was the worst actor you ever dealt with?

Danica D'Hondt: I did an episode of *The Wild Wild West*, and Robert Conrad, at least on set, was the most egotistical and self-centered man I've ever met.

SC: In the 1970s and 1980s, you directed various stage productions, including *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Who's Happy Now?* and *Working*. What challenges did you endure while directing?

Danica D'Hondt: It was difficult being taken seriously as a female director. It was preferred that women were in front of the camera rather than behind it. There were also a lot of men in the industry who didn't want to take direction from a woman. I did some great things, though, as a director. *Who's*



Danica and William Kerwin in *Living Venus* (1961).

Happy Now? won critical acclaim.

SC: There's been a lot of controversy regarding sexual assault allegations against entertainers like Bill Cosby, Harvey Weinstein, and R. Kelly. Was anyone in Hollywood ever inappropriate towards you?

Danica D'Hondt: I did an industry-themed film in the 1960s, and I was mortified when Ed Sullivan started fondling me. He was relentless, too. I didn't expect that of him. It was that same week that Dean Martin's [TV producer-director] Greg Garrison called me into his office and said, "I just want you to know that Dean has seen you and he really likes you. He wants to know if you plan to sleep with him. He hates being rejected which is why he asked me to ask you." I said no, and he said, "That's all right. He was just curious." We continued rehearsals later that day and

Dean was so horrible towards me. Anybody watching could see that he was angry that I wasn't interested in him.

SC: What advice would you give to aspiring actresses?

Danica D'Hondt: Before the #MeToo movement began, I would've told actresses not to date men for parts. A lot of the friends I had in the industry who did that didn't get good parts anyways. The advice that I'd give is that you must be clear about how people perceive you because that will determine the roles you will get. When I was younger, I thought that I could get cast in any role based on my talents. I was wrong. I was frequently cast as statuesque blondes because of my appearance. It seems unfair, but that's the way things are.

SC: Did being a conservative negatively impact your career as an

actress since Hollywood is mostly liberal?

Danica D'Hondt: When I was an actress in Hollywood, I was a liberal. Honestly, I would describe myself as a libertarian. I've been very outspoken regarding vaccines. I'm a believer in choice, and I don't feel that vaccines should be mandated by the federal government. The topic of vaccines has become very political rather than scientific. I am hoping that midterms energize and attract voters who believe in freedom and common sense.

SC: You've been an actress, model, dancer, director, author, and painter. You're now an entrepreneur who operates one of the most renowned wineries in the nation. Do you ever think about returning to acting? If you were offered an onscreen role, would you accept it?

Danica D'Hondt: I wouldn't.

When you're acting, you gotta have good movement because there is so much movement involved in acting. I don't move as well as I used to. I wouldn't do voice acting either, as I don't find it interesting. I'd like to focus on writing.

SC: You've authored two books. When are you going to write your autobiography?

Danica D'Hondt: I should write my memoir, especially since you've brought up a lot of memories. I have written a script about my brother Walter D'Hondt, who was a rower in the Olympics. It's called *The Boys from Nowhere*. I presented the script to Caitlyn Jenner decades ago, but she wanted me to make a lot of changes and add details that were salacious. I'm also writing about my adventures and experiences in the winery industry. I hope to publish it soon.